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# United States and Western Hemisphere Relations

By

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Last December, 2004, I spoke here and outlined our basic, two-fold strategy for the region: to help bridge the divide between citizens and their governments; and, to work for the empowerment of individuals. Without trying to claim that we have reached all of our goals for the Western Hemisphere there is still much to do I would like to go over some of the progress that has been made since my last visit here.

But before I do, I would also like to take this opportunity to extend my personal thanks and that of the people of the United States for the support being provided by our neighbors in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. It is truly humbling to see the many offers of support that are coming in, often from countries that themselves have been recent victims of hurricanes and other natural disasters.

Now, on the subject of U.S. relations with the Western Hemisphere, if you follow only what you read in the newspapers, you would likely conclude that we have done little or nothing except to verbally spar with Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez. To be sure, Castro and Chavez represent the polar opposite of progress in the hemisphere. However, our focus is much broader, focusing on our positive and constructive vision for our neighborhood.

If we had all been together in this room five years ago, I suspect we would have agreed on several critical objectives that we would have wanted to achieve in order to advance freedom and prosperity in the region.

- We would have noted that there were fewer violent conflicts in the region, but we would have vowed to work to bring peace and security to all countries in the region.
- We would have highlighted the need to get corruption under control and make governments more responsive and transparent.
- We would have wanted to break down trade barriers and promote investment.
- We would have talked about the need to raise education levels throughout the hemisphere.
- We most certainly would have called for strengthened democracy and the rule of law in every country in the hemisphere.
- We might have agreed on the need to reward those countries that are adopting the responsible policies of fighting corruption and investing in their people.
- And, we all would have agreed that we should work alongside our neighbors to carry out these critical tasks using the multilateral tools available to us to organize our work and execute our plans.

Five years into the Bush Administration, I would submit that those are exactly the objectives we have been pursuing and the way we have been cooperating. The heart of our strategy is much more than a mere economic model or political paradigm. It is a pact to work together in solidarity with our neighbors to make things better for the poorest among us so that things can be better for all of us. To do that, we promote democracy so every citizen is empowered to decide for themselves what is best for them. We promote free enterprise as a perpetual engine of growth. And we promote the rule of law so that each of us has the guaranteed right to demand our fair share of political freedom and economic opportunity. That is a formula for achieving a genuine revolution in the Americas. And, that is a constructive, positive vision for the Americas. We pursue it in concert with serious partners from across the political spectrum from Lagos in Chile and Lula in Brazil to Saca in El Salvador and Uribe in Colombia.

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One thing that all of these very different leaders from very different countries have in common is that their relations with the United States today are as good as they have ever been. First, we kept our faith with Colombia, completing Plan Colombia and, alongside our Colombian friends, are harvesting the remarkable results of that policy. As a result of President Uribe's leadership and sustained U.S. support, Colombia has made great progress against narco-traffickers and terrorists crime is at its lowest level in sixteen years and nearly 16,000 paramilitaries and other terrorists have either demobilized or deserted. We are working with Colombia to finish the job of Plan Colombia to win the peace, to reactivate the Colombian economy, and to convert Colombia into a strategic partner in the region. We are working with our neighbors to confront the threat of violent gangs that constitute an urgent threat to our common security. With our vigorous leadership, the Organization of American States (OAS) is on the cutting edge in fighting terrorism, the threat of loose Man-Portable Air Defense System (MANPADS), illicit arms trafficking, illegal drugs, and corruption.

We pursue our many goals multilaterally, working daily with the United Nations (U.N.) in places like Haiti and with the OAS throughout in hemisphere to further the interests shared by all the democratic nations of the hemisphere. With the help of a strong boost from President Bush at the Ft. Lauderdale, Florida meeting of the OAS General Assembly we joined with our neighbors in the region to issue the *Declaration of Florida*, which among other things prescribed an early warning system through which the Secretary General of the OAS can request the support of all OAS member states to enforce the terms of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. In the words of our new OAS Secretary General, our goal is to help ensure that governments elected democratically govern democratically, and those that fail to do so are held accountable to their people.

Secretary General José Miguel Insulza has traveled to several countries confronting challenges, including Nicaragua, Haiti, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Colombia. We also have contributed significant resources to support the exercise of democracy in several countries that are holding elections in the year ahead including Haiti, Nicaragua, and Bolivia.

We devoted much resources and thinking to how the United States can best assist Cuba's coming transition and maintain active support to those brave Cubans daring to think about a future without Castro. That culminated in a 500-page report of the President's Commission on Assistance to a Free Cuba. It is a unique document that lays out a strategy beforehand as to how we can help the Cuban people achieve the freedom and prosperity they have been denied for more than forty years.

There are those who criticize this administration's policies toward the Western Hemisphere as overly skewed toward promotion of trade. First of all, I do not accept the notion that our policy is imbalanced, but I am not shy about touting our preference for free trade. Only through free trade can we hope to break down the cycle of poverty and stagnation that has blocked prosperity in the region for so long. And, one of the things of which I am most proud is our decision under the Bush Administration to consciously link our trade agenda with the promotion of democracy and the rule of law. Starting at the top with President Bush, we have stressed the indispensable ties between economic opportunity for all and political empowerment. As a result, our trade partners see these accords as not mere mercantile agreements but a tangible sign of a political partnership.

We took another big step forward in promoting that hemispheric prosperity this year when Congress passed and President Bush signed the Central American Free Trade Agreement-Dominican Republic (CAFTA-DR) free trade agreement. This is another step toward realizing our dream for a full Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). In the meantime, we are pushing forward on negotiations for similar agreements with Panama and the Andean countries of Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia. But, as I noted, these trade agreements are about more than commerce: they are about breaking down entrenched interests, stigmatizing corruption, rewarding reforms that bolster competitiveness, and ensuring that particularly the very poor have the tools they need to claim their fair share of economic opportunity.

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To this end, we have encouraged respect for workers' rights and the environment. And, by the end of this year we will have invested almost \$25 million in Centers of Excellence for Teacher Training in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America that help educate those who might otherwise be locked out of the new jobs that come with new growth.

In March, we joined with Mexico and Canada to pursue what some might regard as impossible: making the most dynamic economic relationship on the planet even better for all of us in North America. Under the unprecedented trilateral Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) we will implement common border security, enhance critical infrastructure protection, implement a common approach to emergency response, improve aviation and maritime security, combat transnational threats, enhance intelligence cooperation, and work to ensure the smooth flow of people and commerce across our shared borders.

Our policies have not merely tended to our largest partners. President Bush conceived of a plan that would reward the best performers among our poorest neighbors. Three of the countries most in need of direct assistance Honduras, Nicaragua and Bolivia have been brought in the Millennium Challenge Account process and will begin to receive some of the \$5 billion proposed by President Bush through fiscal year 2006 to help countries whose governments are adopting sound strategies overcome the key obstacles to development that they have identified for themselves.

I want to stress that the activities I have mentioned are only examples of the sorts of things we are doing to contribute to the well-being of the Western Hemisphere, our own neighborhood. The United States will always be a good partner and reliable neighbor for those who help themselves. Our thriving economy has been the engine for growth for most of this Hemisphere for decades. Our trade policy is intended to open markets on a global scale. And we are committed to working with our neighbors to draft and execute a practical agenda for retooling our economies to make them more just and more competitive. Yet, while our assistance and engagement is substantial and important, it is not what will truly transform the region. If there is one thing I have taken away from my time as Assistant Secretary, it is the very clear sense that what is needed most in the Americas that indispensable element to stability and growth is political leadership and courage at the national level. We can only make a difference when our assistance is used by forward looking, innovative, and, above all, patriotic leaders who are willing to make the difficult decisions necessary to improve the lot of their peoples.

Among the characteristics of model democratic leaders, the keys to governing justly and well are trust, transparency, inclusiveness, and forging a political consensus to pursue the national well-being. This requires more than the will of a president, but the commitment of an entire political class. It is not easy to retool the economy of a developing country, and we will never pretend that it is. Part of the difficulty in countering demagoguery is that we offer no magic bullet, only honesty. Fiscal discipline is difficult. Civil service reform is difficult. Drafting a fair tax code is hard. Devising a rational energy policy is hard. Rewriting a rational labor code is hard. Making it easier to start a private business is easier than it looks, but it's still difficult. Building independent courts and congresses, and ferreting out corruption in all its forms, is hard work. The simple fact is that those who make the tough decisions will succeed. And those who exhaust themselves looking for easy answers should not hold the rest of us back. No matter how much time and attention we pay to the region, nothing we do will substitute for political leaders and their people making the hard decisions for themselves.

That is the sort of blunt talk for which I have become known. I speak clearly for two reasons: first, my Spanish is not good enough for me to be subtle; second, I respect our friends in the region enough to shoot straight with them rather than condescend. Most of this message is missed by journalists who save their one question in a press conference to ask me about Chavez and then write that I am obsessed with Venezuela. Most of them do not have the patience to study what we are doing at the OAS or in the Summit process to know that we are being good neighbors. If we do not solve a problem single-handedly we are accused of not caring, and if we dare to offer an opinion

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about another problem, they accuse us of interfering. It is ironic that in the not-to-distant past, U.S. engagement in the hemisphere was denounced by some as meddling. So I have come to accept the fact that there are those who will find fault with the United States whatever we do.

History and experience have shown everyone how nations can best expand prosperity and secure better lives for their citizens. Open economies and political systems, outward looking trade regimes, and respect for human freedom are the indisputable requirements for a 21st century nation-state. We hardly have to impose that sound model on anyone who wants the very best for his people.

So those who would inveigh against U.S. paternalism or meddling in the Western Hemisphere have lost their essential talking point. I see the dawn of this new century as heralding the end of paternalism in our relations with the region. For those countries seeking to follow this path, we are committed to helping them actively and robustly. If not, then we are under no obligation to subsidize bad decisions.

Many of our friends in the Americas know that our vision works. The problem is, too many of them have had to leave their homes and families to find that out. I was in Miami just a few days ago, and it struck me driving around that fifty miles in every direction from where I was there is a thriving barrio made up of citizens of each of our neighbors in Latin America and the Caribbean. What they found here was a country that met them halfway: that gave them little more than a level playing field and a fighting chance. And they have thrived. And they have prospered. And we are all better off for it. That is what we are working to replicate in every country near and far.

These are the reasons that I am so deeply committed to this country and its President: we offer the world a vision based on the universal aspiration for freedom, the right to define your own future, and the tools to build it.